

Nibbana is not viññāṇa. Really, it just isn't.

[Sujato's Blog](#)

I've just read yet another assertion that tries to slip a 'cosmic consciousness' Nibbana into the Suttas. In these kinds of arguments the same mistakes are made again and again, and you should beware of them.

One popular argument is based on the famous passage:

viññāṇāṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbaṃ pabhaṃ

'Consciousness non-manifest, infinite, radiant all around.'

This is sometimes said to be a term for Nibbana, although since it is an obscure poetic passage of dubious meaning we should not infer any major conclusions from it.

This obscure passage has been often exalted to the revelation of the highest teachings of Nibbana. One of the arguments one hears is that *viññāṇa* normally means 'separative consciousness', and that this has been revalued to refer to an infinite awareness. This argument is wrong.

The etymology of *viññāṇa* is invoked to justify this conclusion. 'Vi', so the story goes, means 'separation', and 'ñāṇa' means 'knowing', so *viññāṇa* means 'separative knowing' (as opposed to the universal cosmic consciousness of Nibbana.)

But you cannot derive the meaning of a word by adding up a root with a prefix. Words derive meaning from context. This is especially true in the case of words in abstract philosophical use.

In any case, the etymology of *viññāṇa* does not mean 'separative consciousness'. The prefix 'vi' has many different meanings, which you can check up on in the [Pali Text Society's dictionary](#). If you don't want to read the entire entry, the applied meanings it gives are four:

1. expansion, spreading out
2. disturbance, separation, mixing up (opp. *saṃ*)
3. the reverse of the simple verb, or loss, difference, opposite
4. in intensifying sense

Obviously, there is no requirement to read *vi* in its separative sense here.

There are many terms formed from the root ‘ñā’ in Pali that all refer to knowing in some way (‘know’ is in fact the English cognate): *aññā*, *ñāṇa*, *pariññā*, *paññā*, *paṭiññā*, *saññā*, and so on. In some cases these words are interchangeable, in some cases usage tells us that they carry different nuances. In no cases can we simply infer the meaning from adding prefix + root.

Given that *vi-* is probably the second most common prefix in Pali, and has an extremely wide variety of implications – including in some cases not affecting the meaning at all – we can’t say anything meaningful from the etymology.

Even if we did look to the etymology, we can come to all sorts of different conclusions. In some cases, *viññāṇa* is clearly a synonym of *paññā*, ‘wisdom’ (e.g. Sutta Nipāta 92-3). Here the implication could be that *vi-* means ‘intensive’, or ‘clear’ (as it does, say, in *vipassanā*).

It is true that the Buddha often presented *viññāṇa* in an analytical way as the consciousness of the six senses. But this tells us nothing about what the word means. He also used plenty of other terms related to the six senses: *vedanā*, *phassa*, or *saññā*, for example. The fact that a word is used in an analytical sense does not mean that the basic meaning of the word is analytical.

On the contrary, what the ‘*viññāṇa* = Nibbana’ school overlook is that *viññāṇa* is in fact used very commonly in the sense, not of ‘separative consciousness’, but of ‘infinite consciousness’. This is, of course, in the standard passage on the formless attainments. This samadhi meaning is directly applicable in the case of the so-called ‘Nibbanic consciousness’, as they are both described as ‘infinite’ (*anantam*).

The Buddhist texts strongly suggest that this idea is pre-Buddhist. And we do indeed find the phrase ‘infinite consciousness’ in the pre-Buddhist Upanishads. But more on that later. First let us survey the use of *viññāṇa* briefly in the oldest Upanishad, the Brihadaranyaka. This probably pre-dates the Buddha by a century or so, and many of its ideas and turns of phrase can be felt in the Suttas.

Viññāṇa is used in the ordinary sense of ‘sense consciousness’:

jihvayā hi rasān vijānāti || BrhUp_3,2.4 ||

For one knows tastes through the tongue.

More commonly it is found as the final of the four terms, ‘seen’, ‘heard’, ‘thought’, ‘cognized’, a set that is frequently found in the Suttas. In this context it is said that ‘how can one cognize the cognizer’, a means of pointing beyond limited sense experience to the true Ātman.

*kaṃ vijānīyāt yenedaṃ sarvaṃ vijānāti taṃ kena vijānīyāt sa eṣa neti nety ātmā
|agrhyo na hi grhyate | aśīryo na hi śīryate |asaṅgo na hi saṅgyate |asito na
vyathate na riṣyati |vijñātāram are kena vijānīyād ity*

Through what should one know that owing to which all this is known ? This self is That which has been described as ‘Not this, Not this’. It is imperceptible, for It is never perceived; undecaying, for It never decays; unattached, for It is never attached; unfettered – it never feels pain, and never suffers injury. Through what, O Maitreyi, should one know the Knower?

BrhUp_2,4.14

See also BrhUp_3,4.2, BrhUp_2,4.5

The self is defined in terms of *viññāṇa*.

katama ātmeti — yo ‘yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ prāṇeṣu hṛdy antarjyotiḥ puruṣaḥ

What is the Self? This very person made of *viññāṇa*, among the breath (life-faculties), the light in the heart.

BrhUp_4,3.7 ||

sa vā ayam ātmā brahma vijñānamayo

This very Self is Brahma, made of *viññāṇa*... (a long list of other things of which Brahma is formed follows)

BrhUp_4,4.5

*yo vijñāne tiṣṭhan vijñānād antaro yaṃ vijñānaṃ na veda yasya vijñānaṃ śarīraṃ
yo vijñānam antaro yamayaty eṣa ta ātmāntaryāmy amṛtaḥ || BrhUp_3,7.22 ||*

He who inhabits the *viññāṇa*, but is within it, whom the *viññāṇa* does not know, whose body is the *viññāṇa*, and who controls the *viññāṇa* from within, is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self.

As in Buddhism, *viññāṇa* is closely associated with rebirth. In the following passage, the phrase *ekībhavati* refers to the withdrawal of the sense at the time of death – which is interesting since in Buddhism the same term is used to mean samadhi. *Viññāṇa* has two meanings here: in the first use it refers to sense-consciousness (because others realize that the dying person no longer hears or responds). Later it refers to the conscious self that takes rebirth.

*ekībhavati na vijānātīty āhuḥ | tasya haitasya hṛdayasyāgraṃ pradyotate | tena
pradyotenaīṣa ātmā niṣkrāmati | cakṣuṣṭo vā mūrdhno vānyebhyo vā
śarīradeśebhyaḥ | tam utkrāmantaṃ prāṇo ‘nūtkrāmati | prāṇam anūtkrāmantaṃ
sarve prāṇā anūtkrāmanti | savijñāno bhavati | saṃjānam evānvavakrāmati | taṃ
vidyākarmaṇī samanvārabhete pūrvaprajñā ca ||*

He becomes united; then they say, ‘He does not have *viññāṇa*’. The top of the heart brightens. Through that brightened top the self departs, either through the

eye, or through the head, or through any other part of the body. When it departs, the vital force follows; when the vital force departs, all the organs follow. Then the self has *viññāṇa*, and goes to the body which is related to that consciousness. It is followed by knowledge, kamma and past experience.
BrhUp_4,4.2

But the most directly applicable passage is the following. Like several of the above it is the teaching of Yājñavalkya, who should be recognized as the father of the teachings of consciousness as the great Brahman. Notice the simile of the lump of salt, also familiar in Buddhism. The passage from which this is taken is full of such parallels, as I discussed in *A History of Mindfulness*.

evaṃ vā ara idaṃ mahad bhūtam anantam apāraṃ vijñānaghana eva | etebhyo bhūtebhyaḥ samutthāya tāny evānūvinaśyati | na pretya samjñāstīy are bravīmi | iti hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ || BrhUp_2,4.12 ||

As a lump of salt dropped into water dissolves with (its component) water, and no one is able to pick it up, but from wheresoever one takes it, it tastes salt, even so, my dear, this great, endless, infinite Reality is but sheer mass of *viññāṇa*. This comes out from these elements, and is destroyed with them. After this it has no more perception (*saññā*). This is what I say, my dear. So said Yajnavalkya.

Compare with the Buddhist line above. Both describe *viññāṇa* as ‘infinite’ (*anantam*). Both use the philosophical term *mahābhūta*, although in different sense: in the Buddhist context it is a word for the four elements which the state of *viññāṇa* described goes beyond, whereas here it is the Great Reality itself. The Upanishadic passage describes the infinite consciousness as having disappeared or become non-manifest like salt dissolved in water, just as the Buddhist passage describes *viññāṇa* as ‘non-manifest’ (*anidassana*). The Buddhist passage speaks of *viññāṇa* as ‘radiant’, just as elsewhere the self that is *viññāṇa* is said to be the ‘light in the heart’.

The parallels are by no means arbitrary. In fact the Buddhist passage appears in a specifically Brahmanical context. The text is the Kevaddha Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 11: text [here](#), translation [here](#), parallels [here](#).) A monk wants to find out where the four Great Elements (*mahābhūta*) end, and goes to Brahma for the answer. Brahma, however, doesn’t know, and he sends the monk back to the Buddha. The Buddha rejects the original question, and tells the monk how it should be reformulated.

The basic idea is clear enough. Brahma’s realm extends as far as jhana, as Buddhists assume that the Brahmanical philosophy was based on jhanic experience (at best). So Brahma doesn’t know what lies beyond this, while the Buddha does.

The problem is that, apparently, what lies beyond is a kind of consciousness. Given the evident connections between this description and the Brahmanical conception of the higher atman as a form of infinite consciousness, the most obvious inference is that it refers to the formless attainments, specifically that of ‘infinite consciousness’, where the ‘four great elements’ don’t find a footing.

It is in the next lines of the verse, which are usually overlooked by the *viññāṇa* = Nibbana school, that the Buddha's true position is stated. With the cessation of *viññāṇa* all this comes to an end. The 'infinite consciousness' is merely the temporary escape from the oppression of materiality, but true liberation is the ending of all consciousness.

*‘Kattha āpo ca pathavī,
Tejo vāyo na gādhati;
Kattha dīghañca rassañca,
Aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ;
Kattha nāmañca rūpañca,
Asesaṃ uparujjhatī’*ti.

Where does water and earth
fire, air not find a footing?
Where does long and short
Small, gross, fair and ugly,
Where does name and form
Without remainder cease?

Tatra veyyākaraṇaṃ bhavati—

For that the explanation is:

*‘Viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ,
Anantaṃ sabbatopabhaṃ;
Ettha āpo ca pathavī,
Tejo vāyo na gādhati.
Viññāṇa non-manifest*

Infinite, radiant all-round
There water and earth
fire, air do not find a footing

*Ettha dīghañca rassañca,
Aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ;
Ettha nāmañca rūpañca,
Asesaṃ uparujjhati;
Viññāṇassa nirodhena,
Etthetaṃ uparujjhatī’*”ti.

There does long and short
Small, gross, fair and ugly,
There does name and form
Without remainder cease:
With the cessation of *viññāṇa*
There this ceases.

The problem is not so much the interpretation of *viññāṇa* as such, but the syntax of the verses – which is one reason why poetry should not decide doctrine. The Buddha rephrases the original question, but his rephrasing has three question words and two verbs. It may be read as a single complex question, but this assumes that the two verbs mean the same thing (which they don't: *na gādhati* means 'does not find a firm footing', like a man crossing a ford, while *uparujjhati* means 'ceases') – and that *viññāṇa* means 'infinite consciousness of Nibbana' in the first occurrence and 'separative sense consciousness' in the second.

It is simpler and more natural to read the verses as asking two questions, with the verb *uparujjhati* (ceases) acting as a 'lamp' to apply to both the preceding clauses. In that case the syntax of the answer would be expressed thusly:

Water, earth, fire, air do not find a footing in *viññāṇa* that is non-manifest, infinite, radiant all-round.

(i.e., the four material elements cease temporarily in the formless attainments, which is the highest reach of the Brahmanical teachings – even this much Brahma, being a deity of the form realm, did not know.)

Long and short, small, gross, fair and ugly, name and form cease without remainder with the cessation of *viññāṇa*. This is where this all ceases.

(i.e., the Buddha's real teaching is not to temporarily escape materiality, but to reach an ending of suffering. And since all forms of *viññāṇa* (*yam kiñci viññāṇam...*) are said countless times to be suffering, even the infinite consciousness has to go.)

In this reading, the reason for the Buddha's reformulation of the original question becomes clear. The errant monk had asked where the ending of the four elements was – which is of course the formless attainments. But the Buddha said the question was wrongly put, as this would merely lead beyond the form realm of Brahma to the formless realms. The real question is what lies beyond that, with the cessation of consciousness. It is not enough for matter to be transcended, one must also transcend mind as well. If not, one ends up, apart from all the other philosophical problems, with a mind/body dualism.

And one ends up with a description of the Buddhist goal which is not merely indistinguishable from the Brahmanical Higher Self, but is quite evidently the same thing. A description that was meant to critique the inadequate conception of the Brahmanical goal is turned into a description of the Buddhist goal. Meanwhile, the hundreds of times when the Buddha explicitly and definitively refuted this idea (*viññāṇam aniccam...*) are explained away with a trivial etymological mistake. And so it goes...